

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I ask for 4 additional minutes to finish my statement.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I was going to use the occasion to ask unanimous consent that following the Senator from Washington speaking, I would like to be recognized for up to 10 minutes in morning business.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, we have a number of Senators on our side seeking recognition. Perhaps we can put that together fairly quickly.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Chair notes that at this time, there is 5 minutes left in morning business for the Republican side. The Democratic side has used all of its time in morning business.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that morning business be extended to include 4 minutes for myself, the Senator from Washington—

Mr. CORNYN. I would like 10 minutes.

Mrs. MURRAY. Ten minutes to the Senator from Texas, 5 minutes to the Senator from Montana, 10 minutes to the Senator from Illinois.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, I assumed we were going to go off morning business and onto the calendar. I was going to speak for 20 minutes, so I will speak in line of appearance on the floor for 20 minutes at whatever appropriate time that is.

Mrs. MURRAY. I add that to the consent request, that if there are Republican Senators who would like intervening times, in between, we include those as well in the unanimous consent request.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CORNYN. Reserving the right to object, and I will not object, I express my appreciation to the Senator from Washington for allowing Republican Senators to intervene and the extent to which Democratic Members speak, I would like to make sure we have equivalent time on our side. I think we can work that out.

Mrs. MURRAY. That is included in my request. I ask additionally that Senator MENENDEZ be allowed 10 minutes as well as the end of that unanimous subsequent request.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection? The Senator from Montana.

Mr. BAUCUS. I ask that my 5 minutes be expanded to 10 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Does the Senator so modify her request?

Mrs. MURRAY. I do.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The request is so modified. Is there objection to the existing unanimous consent request? Without objection, it is so ordered.

THUD APPROPRIATIONS

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, as I was saying, Secretary Paulson has

been complaining about the need for mortgage counseling, and he said:

For this public outreach campaign to be successful, there must be enough trained mortgage counselors to answer the phone when homeowners call. The administration requested funding for NeighborWorks America and other nonprofit mortgage counseling operations in its budget. But the appropriations bill has yet to be finalized; Congress needs to get it done quickly.

That was not me, that was Secretary Paulson. We can do that right now. In fact, we could have done it last month. We are trying desperately to send this bill in its final stages that includes critical investment in housing counseling to the White House, just as Secretary Paulson said he wanted us to do.

The bipartisan conferees on this bill agree that the amount the President asked for was too low to meet the demand for housing counseling, given the size of the problem. Congress acted. We increased it substantially. But even though every Republican conferee on our bill signed onto that plan, we are now being blocked from sending it to the White House. I only wish the Senate Republican leadership would follow the words of Secretary Paulson and Secretary Jackson about the need for this urgent initiative.

Yesterday's Washington Post published an article on our \$200 million housing counseling initiative. I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD the Washington Post article.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Washington Post, Dec. 4, 2007]

NONPROFIT GROUPS TAKE CENTER STAGE

(By Renae Merle)

In the middle of his speech yesterday on the administration's efforts to fix the mortgage crisis, Treasury Secretary Henry M. Paulson Jr. paused to carefully spell out a toll-free telephone number that troubled homeowners can call for help.

The hotline is not staffed by government officials or mortgage lenders. Rather, the calls are answered by consumer counselors from nonprofit groups, which are taking an increasingly high-profile role in helping borrowers with mortgage problems.

The groups are acting in some cases as a buffer between lenders and homeowners. Legislation is pending before Congress that would tap NeighborWorks America, a national nonprofit group, to distribute \$200 million to local counseling centers. In October, the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America, often a vocal critic of mortgage lenders, signed a deal with Countrywide Financial, the nation's biggest mortgage lender, to help restructure loans for struggling Countrywide clients.

However the administration addresses the mortgage crisis, "they are going to need the nonprofit community," said Kenneth D. Wade, chief executive of NeighborWorks.

His group is training new housing counselors and plans to double its counseling staff by next month. "We think every consumer needs a mortgage adviser," he said.

Nonprofit organizations around the country are already seeing a soaring demand for their services. St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center in Baltimore, which usually sees about 700 families a year, says it has met with almost 2,000 so far this year.

At the National Foundation for Credit Counseling, where about half the counselors at its member agencies focus on housing issues, President Susan Keating says: "We are very, very busy."

Government and mortgage industry officials don't often agree on what caused the mortgage crisis, what its impact will be, or how to cure it, but they all say that reaching homeowners before they go into foreclosure is difficult.

If a homeowner with an adjustable-rate mortgage that is about to reset, or one who is behind in payments receives mail from his lender offering help, the homeowner responds 3 to 5 percent of the time, according to Hope Now, a new alliance of mortgage industry and nonprofit organizations. If the offer comes from a community group, the response rate is about 25 percent. About 50 percent of homeowners who go into foreclosure do so without ever contacting their lender.

"If we are to make a difference, that number has to be reduced," Paulson said.

The best hope, many think, may be through the nonprofit community. The toll-free number Paulson touted—888-995-HOPE—has seen a spike in volume, to 3,000 calls a day from 300 a year ago.

There are 180 consumer counselors from six nonprofit groups answering those calls. That will increase to 250 by the end of the year, according to the Homeownership Preservation Foundation, which manages the hotline.

With an estimated 2 million adjustable-rate mortgages scheduled to reset in the next two years, even that likely will not be enough. "We are definitely not going to be stopping at 250," said Tracy Morgan, a spokeswoman for the foundation, which is largely financed by the mortgage industry.

The counselors focus on diagnosing the homeowners' problems, then direct them to a local community group for help or guide them through a call with their lender. The initial call usually lasts about 45 minutes as the counselor puts together a detailed budget analysis and creates an action plan for the homeowner, according to the foundation. That could include getting a second job or reducing spending. The foundation does not charge homeowners for the service.

In a separate program, the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America acts as a go-between, working out deals with lenders on behalf of borrowers. Under its deal with Countrywide, the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America has restructured about 200 loans.

Like many nonprofit groups, it has seen demand for its services climb in the past year and attributes most of the increase to homeowners with adjustable-rate mortgages. To keep up with demand, the organization is opening five offices around the country and is hiring about 30 employees a month.

"This is just the beginning. It is going to get far worse," said Bruce Marks, the group's chief executive.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, this article describes the importance of nonprofit housing counseling agencies and all they can do to help keep our mortgage holders in their homes.

Finally, I wish to say this: In the recent days, the storms in my State of Washington highlight how critical and important this bill is. Devastating mud slides and floods in my State of Washington and the State of Oregon have swamped out homes and washed out roads all across our States. It has been devastating. Families are hurting. People cannot get to work. People cannot get to where they need to go. Many of

our roads are closed, including a 20-mile stretch of Interstate 5, a major artery connecting Seattle and Portland, which will be closed through Thursday, possibly longer, and the floods have virtually isolated communities across the Pacific Northwest. My heart goes out to all these families who have been affected.

We are going to be feeling the effect of this storm you have been watching on television for days, weeks, possibly months. That is not just because it caused serious damage to our roads and bridges. The closure of I-5 forced cars and trucks traveling from Seattle to Portland to detour all the way to the Tri-Cities. That is a drive that not only takes 4 hours longer, but it means our drivers have to go across a high mountain pass, not once but twice, to get to Portland. Think about the effect that is going to have on our businesses and our economy.

The impact of that storm reinforces how important transportation infrastructure is to every single one of us. We need to make those investments in our roads, in our bridges, in our airports, in our railways because one rain storm, one bridge disaster, one airport disruption can have huge impacts on our families and our economy throughout the region and throughout the country.

I am deeply disappointed the Republican leadership has said no. This is a bill that has passed the conference committee, passed the House, and it has one more step to make it to the President. It has bipartisan support. There is no reason we cannot finish this business, send it to the President, and get one of the critical appropriations bills done that he has been yelling we have been holding up. It is here. We are ready. We are waiting for a response.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I hear the distinguished Senator from Washington and other Members on that side of the aisle complain about their inability to get things done. But I have to remind them, here we are on December 5, 2007. We have been operating on a continuing resolution because the majority has failed to pass and send to the President 11 appropriations bills. We are not doing the basic work Congress is supposed to do to keep the lights on, to keep the Government working. Unfortunately, it doesn't stop there.

Mr. BAUCUS. Will the Senator yield?

Mr. CORNYN. I will not yield.

Mr. BAUCUS. I think the Senator from Washington made a point to show the Senator from Texas is incorrect.

Mr. CORNYN. I will reclaim my right to the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas has the floor.

Mr. CORNYN. I will be glad to respond to the distinguished Senator after I conclude my remarks.

The fact now is that we have before us an effort—a misguided effort—to protect 23 or so million Americans from a middle-class tax increase. We know health care providers and physicians are going to be subjected to Draconian cuts in their reimbursement rates. We know our intelligence community needs a permanent solution to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which will expire in February. And we know that instead of providing the funding to our troops that they need in order to protect us and our allies in the global war on terror, we are seeing strings attached, other qualifications insisted upon by the other party, which have impeded and slowed down and, indeed, to this point stopped our ability to fund our troops.

I wish to particularly, though, focus on the tax increase that, as a result of the inaction of the majority—the so-called alternative minimum tax—is going to take place unless we find some way to work our way through this issue without a tremendous tax increase on other hard-working Americans.

If there were ever a misnomer for a tax, this would be it because for an increasing number of Americans the alternative minimum tax is neither alternative, nor is it minimal.

Congress, it should be remembered, created the AMT almost 40 years ago in response to the testimony of the then-Secretary of the Treasury that 155 taxpayers paid zero Federal income tax on their 1967 tax returns. Unfortunately, but I guess predictably, this tax, created to target the very rich, the 155 who paid no taxes, has now grown to cover roughly 6 million people today and will grow to cover roughly 23 million people next year unless action is taken. It has, in the process, grown to cover more and more taxpayers and now will capture unsuspecting middle-class taxpayers by surprise unless Congress acts. This is because, unlike the regular income tax, the AMT is not indexed for inflation. This means that over time, economic growth and inflation have caused a steady increase in the number of middle-income taxpayers who will get hit by the AMT. Working parents who have children and qualify for deductions and credits under the standard tax system get a rude awakening when they discover they are subjected to the alternative minimum tax, which literally cancels out many of these deductions. This will add unnecessary complexity to the Tax Code and increase tax compliance costs and complicate taxpayers' decisions.

In recent years, Congress has enacted temporary fixes to prevent the AMT from hitting millions of taxpayers with a higher tax bill. While this solution is not perfect, it did at least limit the reach of the AMT.

Now, the Senate has considered legislation on five different occasions that would have either eliminated the AMT or greatly scaled it back. In one instance, not a single member of the ma-

jority party voted to fully repeal the AMT, and only one Democrat supported a proposal that would have rolled the increase in the AMT back to rates that took place under President Clinton. Of course, history tells us that President Clinton himself vetoed the bill that would have eliminated the AMT back in 1999.

We know the majority leader has now filed cloture on H.R. 3996, known as the Temporary Tax Relief Act of 2007. Note, Mr. President, the title, "Temporary Tax Relief." While the bill provides limited temporary relief for taxpayers, it, at the same time, permanently increases taxes on America's entrepreneurs and makes it more difficult for the United States to remain competitive in the global capital market. In other words, it makes taxpayers pay for the mistake Congress made 40 years ago when it created the AMT.

The bill makes fundamental changes to the laws affecting the taxation of partnerships. These partnerships have successfully encouraged the pooling of capital, ideas, and skills in a manner that promotes entrepreneurship and risk-taking, and, not to be overlooked, jobs. The bill raises taxes on capital formation in the United States and will increase the cost of and thus decrease the availability of capital to businesses throughout the country. The bill will severely handicap a vibrant and growing part of the U.S. economy in terms of our global competitiveness.

International competition for capital is a driving factor for business. At a time when many of us are raising concerns regarding the competitiveness of U.S. capital markets and pointing out that our economic competitors are doing everything they can to emulate the success of our capital markets, the last thing we should want to do is to put the United States and U.S. businesses to a disadvantage by increasing taxes on capital formation and driving investment dollars away to other markets. We simply can't afford for the Senate to tax long-term investments in a way that puts America at a competitive disadvantage.

Many on the other side would argue that any AMT relief should be "paid for" by raising revenue in order to neutralize the effect of the AMT cut. They say they can't just fix the AMT because it is revenue they have already anticipated. This is a revenue which, in fact, they need to fund the ever-increasing growth of the Federal Government, unfortunately demonstrated by pork-laden appropriations bills and a bloated budget. At every turn throughout the year's appropriations season, we have seen the majority push for more and more spending. Threatened with a Presidential veto, they have dared the President to veto these bloated spending bills, only to find us in the mess we are in today.

Those on the other side of the aisle have been counting on the increased revenue from the AMT to fund their growth of the Federal Government.

They seem to consider the mistaken growth of the AMT to be some kind of windfall profit, and, in fact, they seem to have forgotten where the money comes from in the first place. We all should know it comes from hard-working American taxpayers, families, people in my State of Texas who already pay their fair share of taxes and can't afford to bear the burden of the Government's mistakes. So rather than fix the AMT and protect taxpayers from this unwarranted and unexpected tax increase, my colleagues would prefer to replace the AMT revenue with a new tax under a new name. I have to tell you that this kind of shell game is a too typical Washington approach.

Instead of figuring out ways to keep the hands of Washington bureaucrats in the pockets of taxpayers, this Congress ought to continue to do all it can to protect millions of middle-class taxpayers from a tax that no one ever intended for them to have to pay in the first place. Taxpayers already work for 4 months out of the year to pay their local, State, and Federal taxes. The last thing Congress should be doing is increasing the number of days American taxpayers work for Uncle Sam instead of for their families.

What is worse, Congress's inability to provide timely AMT relief will also cause unnecessary delays in processing tax returns and getting refunds to taxpayers who are entitled to them. The IRS Oversight Board, an independent board created by Congress as part of the IRS Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998, told Congress just last month that a delay threatens the IRS's ability to process returns and issue refunds in a timely manner and will impose a significant burden on taxpayers. But that is where we find ourselves today as a result of the mismanagement of our agenda.

According to the IRS governing Oversight Board, delaying the filing season by just 2 weeks would delay the processing of 6.7 million returns, putting a hold on \$17 billion in refunds owed to hard-working American taxpayers. If the tax season is delayed by 1 month, this would delay 40 million returns from being processed, and \$87 billion in refund checks owed to taxpayers would remain in the Federal Treasury. This is real money to real Americans, and the political games surrounding it ought to end. We should not be using the AMT relief as hostage to be exchanged for tax-and-spend policies and the growth of the Federal Government. Taxpayers can't afford it and neither can the American economy.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CARDIN). The Senator from Montana.

MR. BAUCUS. Mr. President, if I understand the Senator from Texas correctly, he is essentially complaining that Congress has not passed legislation to prevent the alternative minimum tax from going into effect for American taxpayers for calendar year 2007. I think that is basically what he

is saying. I might say, Mr. President, there is not one Senator on the floor who disagrees with that—maybe one or two, but this Senator wants to fix AMT so Americans do not have to pay an additional tax in calendar 2007 when they are preparing their tax returns next year. I daresay virtually every Member on this side of the aisle has that same belief. We do not want to force that additional tax on Americans for all the reasons he correctly stated; namely, this was a provision which was enacted in the code back in the early 1960s intended to ensure—I think there were 200 only, very wealthy Americans who were not paying income taxes and who should pay some income taxes. That was the genesis of the alternative minimum tax. Unfortunately, as has been stated by many speakers, it was not indexed, so over the years more and more middle-income taxpayers have had to pay this additional tax, and frankly, ironically perversely, the most wealthy Americans have escaped.

So this alternative minimum tax does not do what it was intended to do. It was not a tax on the most wealthy because basically the capital gains provisions in it are so low, the net effect is the basic rate is 26 percent for the first \$75,000 and 28 percent just above, and so it affects taxpayers who make between \$75,000 and \$500,000. That is who it hits. We want to repeal that for 2007. Virtually every Senator here wants to repeal that for 2007. We are trying to do it. We are trying to get that enacted—the repeal for 2007—so taxpayers don't pay it.

What has happened? We are being blocked. We are being blocked. Just as the Senator from Washington was trying to get an appropriations bill up, she was blocked in her effort by the other side of the aisle. Just as the President of the United States says: Congress, do your work, do your work, pass appropriations bills, he is, in effect, instructing his minions here to do the opposite—to block. That is what is happening.

The Senator from Texas, I would daresay—and it is a presumption to say this—would probably vote against efforts here on the floor to bring up a way to fix AMT. There is a cloture motion pending right now, Mr. President. It is basically on the House-passed bill to fix AMT. The leader offered a couple suggestions. What are they? One is, well, if we can't do that, let's take up the measure proposed by myself and the ranking member of the Finance Committee, Senator GRASSLEY. What does it provide? It basically says: Okay, repeal AMT. We have the AMT patch unpaid for, 2007. In addition, we have to pass these so-called tax extenders for 1 or 2 years and pay for it. Nobody seems to complain about that; the complaint is whether the AMT should be paid for. We are willing, myself and Senator GRASSLEY, to bring up and advocate the passing of that legislation. Blocked. We couldn't get consent to bring that up. Not paying for AMT but paying for extenders blocked.

Well, Mr. President, I have another suggestion. In fact, it was even mentioned by our leader. Let us bring up AMT not paid for alone. Will the Republicans object to that? So far, they have. I am waiting. Where is the Republican Party? Do they or do they not want AMT fixed in 2007? What could be easier? Bring it up—alone, unpaid for. Where are they? Why don't they accept it? What is going on here, Mr. President? What could be easier? What could be more appropriate? What could be more Republican? Lowering taxes, unpaid for. No, they do not want to do that, either, which is a good indication to me that what is really going on here—what is really going on here—is that side of the aisle will do whatever is possible to prevent the Congress from even passing legislation that is very good for the American people.

Mrs. MURRAY. Will the Senator from Montana yield for a question?

Mr. BAUCUS. I will be glad to yield.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I ask the Senator from Montana, within the extenders package is the deduction of the State sales tax extension, something that has been granted by Congress for the last 7 years to a number of States that were, prior to a few years ago, not able to deduct their State sales tax. That is very important to people in my State. We need to have this extender passed. I wish to ask the Senator from Montana if that is one of the issues that is being blocked now by the Republicans as they object to going to this package because as we come up on the end of the year, as families are looking at what to purchase for Christmas, this is something extremely important to them. If this is not going to be extended, it will impact their incomes at a critical time, when we are facing rising gas prices, the cost of our mortgages, and people are worried about everything else.

So I would ask the Senator from Montana, is the State sales tax deduction part of that extension that is now being blocked?

Mr. BAUCUS. I say to my dear friend from Washington that it is part of the extender package that is in there. So if that were extended this year and that would go into effect, the good people of the State of Washington would not have to pay that.

Mrs. MURRAY. I thank the Senator from Montana. It is very important to our State and a number of other States—I believe Texas and other States here. I hope the Republicans don't continue to block this so we can indeed make sure our constituents are taken care of.

Mr. BAUCUS. I appreciate that. I may also say I suspect—I am only guessing here—the objection from the other side of the aisle is in part mischievous. Senators from the other side of the aisle wish to force some votes on some other measures which are not apt at this moment. What are they? President Bush's tax cuts, extending the tax cuts, extending the 2001 tax cuts. Some

Senators on the other side want to force a vote on that. That doesn't expire until 2010. This is 2007; AMT applies to 2007. We have to act now. This isn't 2010.

Others wish to vote on the 2003 tax cuts, which expire—when? Again, 2010. Not now; in 2010.

I see my time is expiring. I strongly urge people to focus on what is going on here—not the rhetoric, just look at the facts. The facts are that I, as chairman of the Finance Committee, am willing and do advocate bringing up legislation to repeal the alternative minimum tax as it applies to taxpayers for 2007. There are various ways to do it. One is the House-passed bill. If that doesn't work, we will do the measure proposed by myself and Senator GRASSLEY, which is AMT, not paid for, but the tax extenders paid for. If that doesn't work, I am even willing to go so far as to see AMT alone, not paid for. That is where we should be and what we should do.

Finally, I don't know if I am known as a partisan guy. I think I tend to be perceived as somebody who tries to work things out, tries to be pragmatic, tries to get things done, not flail in a partisan manner, not engage in flowery rhetoric for the heck of it, getting headlines, and so forth. There comes a time when you have to call it like it is, say it like it is. That is what I am trying to do. I am trying to be practical and pragmatic here by calling it, saying what is going on here, and that is, despite the cries from the other side, despite the cries from the White House for Congress to fix AMT, they themselves, behind the scenes, indirectly, are blocking it. They are blocking it. They are saying one thing and doing something else.

As my father used to tell me, it is deeds, not words. They have the words but they also are blocking the deeds. I hope very much they change their minds and allow us to pass legislation here to fix AMT, because it is up to them to let us do it.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The assistant majority leader is recognized.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I see the Senator from Georgia is on the floor. I know it is our custom to take turns on each side of the aisle, but I ask his indulgence. I have to chair a subcommittee hearing at 2:30. Unless he has a scheduling conflict, if he would allow me to go first, I would appreciate it.

Mr. ISAKSON. As a Bears fan, I will be happy to relinquish the time to the Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. Thank you. We need all the help we can get.

Mr. President, what I have heard this afternoon on the floor of the Senate is nothing short of incredible. The Senator from Washington came to the floor and asked to bring an appropriations bill up for us to consider. Have you noticed how much business we are doing around here? The answer is none.

So there is nothing to conflict with it. We have plenty of time. Shouldn't we earn our paycheck today by doing something? The bill she wanted to bring is an appropriations bill and it is a conference report that has been signed by every Democrat and Republican—bipartisan. Everybody is agreed on it.

She asked to bring it to the floor to consider it, and there was an objection from the Senator from Texas. Senator JOHN CORNYN objected.

Senator MURRAY tried to explain what was in this bill, how important it is. He didn't waiver. He said that is it, we object to considering this bill.

Eventually she yielded the floor to Senator CORNYN who stood up and said, Do you know what is wrong with this Senate? We are not considering any appropriations bills. Just minutes before it was Senator CORNYN of Texas who objected to considering an appropriations bill. That is a matter of record.

But beyond that procedural experience, look what was in that bill. It is not just—just?—transportation and housing and urban development; \$200 million is in there for housing counselors across America. What are they going to do? They are going to try to help families work themselves out of this mortgage foreclosure crisis we are facing. This money is desperately needed. Senator MURRAY worked to put it in the bill so people would have a helping hand to save their homes when they are facing foreclosure.

How big an issue is this? Mr. President, 2.2 million Americans face foreclosure on their mortgages. If they go forward with those foreclosures, 44 million American homes will lose value.

You see, the mortgage crisis is not just your neighbor's problem, it is your problem. If that house on your block is foreclosed upon, the value of your home goes down. That is a fact. So 44 million homeowners across America are waiting to see if this Government will do anything.

Senator MURRAY comes to the floor and tries to move the bill to do something. The Republicans object.

I tell you, this is an issue that strikes home in Illinois. Cook County, where Chicago is located, has the second highest number of foreclosures of any county in America—56,000 mortgage foreclosures. As a result, two out of three homes in Cook County, IL, will lose value. This is a crisis. It is not only a housing crisis, it has put our economy in a tailspin. We are trying to move and act and do something about it, and the Republicans say no. No, we don't want to do that.

That is unfortunate. It is unfortunate for the homeowners who need a helping hand. It is unfortunate for their neighbors who do not realize that this kind of effort by the Republican Senators is not in the best interests of America or its economy.

It troubles me as well because this bill includes money to rebuild the bridge near Minneapolis, the one that

came crashing down, with deaths involved and real concern across America about the quality and safety of our infrastructure. Senator MURRAY, on this bill, on a bipartisan basis, puts money in—\$1 billion, is it?—for bridges across America, including the bridge in Minneapolis.

I would beg Senator NORM COLEMAN of Minnesota to speak to Senator CORNYN of Texas and ask him to take his hold off this bill, to stop objecting for the good of his own home State of Minnesota and for all of our States. I hope Senator CORNYN of Texas will reconsider his position; will remove his objection to this bill; will let us move to this appropriations bill in a timely fashion.

This is not the only time we have run into this. Senator CONRAD of North Dakota was here a moment ago, begging for the farm bill to come to the floor. Every 5 years we have a new farm bill. It takes a lot of work to put it together. It is a very important bill to Illinois and almost every State, and the Republicans have stopped it in its tracks. We waited here on this floor for 2 weeks and did nothing because the Republicans refused to reach an agreement on moving this bill forward. The Senate rules are written so that even a minority party can stop business. Senator CONRAD said, let's agree on a list of amendments. You can have yours, we will have ours, but let's get going, let's get to work. And the Republican answer is no.

It is not the first time. Fifty-six times so far this year, the Republicans have filibustered, stopping debate, stopping legislation, stopping attempts to make America better—56 times.

You might say, I am sure that goes on every day, doesn't it? No. The record in the Senate is 61 filibusters over a 2-year period of time. The Republican Senators this year are about to break the record for filibusters in one Congress in 1 year. It tells you what they are all about. It is not doing the people's business. It is not trying to solve the housing crisis, dealing with the farm issues. It is about stopping the business on the floor of the Senate. They are using that opportunity and that authority to do that.

I want to correct the RECORD. Staff just advised me that Senator SPECTER and not Senator CORNYN was directed on behalf of the Republican leadership to object to the earlier bill. I want to make it clear and apologize to my colleague Senator CORNYN—we are friends—and I misrepresented his position on that because it was, in fact, Senator SPECTER of Pennsylvania speaking on behalf of the Republican leadership. Senator MCCONNELL of Kentucky, who objected to the transportation bill. I hope the RECORD reflects that, and my apologies to Senator CORNYN for mentioning his name improperly.

But the position still stands. A Republican leadership position, directed to stop the appropriations bill, and

then Republicans coming to the floor saying, Isn't it a shame we can't move appropriations bills.

The last thing I want to mention is the alternative minimum tax. This will affect 19 million Americans if we don't change it. Some are in higher income categories. Many are not. We want to make sure we correct this problem and move forward with it. I think the responsible thing to do is, if you are going to cut a tax, either raise another tax or cut spending. I think that is responsible. Republicans reject that. They say we want to cut taxes and we don't want to pay for it. We want to add to the deficit and it is OK, and they can prevail because we don't have 60 votes. It takes 60 votes to accomplish something here on the Senate floor of controversy.

So what we offered to them is their way of looking at the world. We will let you cut this tax and not pay for it, just add to the deficit, the old Republican way of doing things. You prevail. You win. And their answer? No, we won't even let you go to the bill under those circumstances. It is pretty clear; it is a question of blocking and intransigence.

In addition to the fact that the Republicans are blocking the farm bill, an attempt to deal with the mortgage crisis in America, bridge building for the State of Minnesota and all other States, and dealing with the alternative minimum tax, it is pretty clear they want this Congress to end without any accomplishments. They had a do-nothing Congress which cost them control in the last election. They are determined to do everything they can to make sure we do nothing in this Congress.

Sadly, the message to the American voters is we need more votes. If you want real change in Congress, we need more Senators to come to this floor who want to accomplish things, rather than stop things and block things. That is what we have seen repeatedly here, this day and every day during the course of the session. I had hoped a handful of Republican Senators would stand up and say: Enough. We have a responsibility to the people of this country, a responsibility that goes beyond our party responsibility. We need to pass a farm bill, we need to do something about the housing crisis, we need to give real tax relief to American families.

We are still waiting for those voices, and I hope they will come to the floor and accomplish that. In the meantime, we will continue to make our offers to the Republican leadership, to find a responsible way to move forward. I hope they will accept this opportunity and I hope we can get something accomplished. It is clear, as this empty Chamber passes hour after weary hour doing nothing, the American people are fed up with it. I think they are fed up with it enough to want real change in the next election.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia is recognized.

THE MIDDLE EAST

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, last week the Middle East observed a historic anniversary, in fact, a historic anniversary for all of mankind, for the 29th of November was the 60th anniversary of the U.N. resolution partitioning the State of Israel and providing a homeland for the Israeli people. I had the opportunity to be in Israel while that celebration was taking place. Another event took place in Annapolis, MD, the home State of the Presiding Officer, last Tuesday, the 28th of November, when 18 Arab Nations, the Palestinian Authority, and Prime Minister Olmert of Israel met in Annapolis, to try to begin the process for the roadmap for peace in the Middle East. I think all of us are encouraged, happy, and rewarded that the result of that conference was an agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Israel to try, over the next 12 months, to reach an agreement by the end of 2008, which will in fact bring about peace in the Middle East.

All of us have great hope, but all of us have great wonder how we get from the agreement to try to actually having that happen. Since I had the occasion to be in Israel, I thought I would share for a second the fact that, as complex as the Middle East is, as challenging as the issues are that face the nation of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, there are some simple steps upon which we can build to possibly get to a true roadmap to a lasting peace in the Middle East.

There is no question, from having gone there, that the first step is security. The State of Israel deserves the security to live in peace and without intimidation and without threat. Not long ago, Israel took its settlements out of Gaza, moved those settlements out of Gaza to its perimeter. Within months, Hamas took over as the leading authority in Gaza, a Palestinian area, and instead of securing it for themselves began a method of intimidation and threat and terror against the people of Israel. Last Saturday, I stood on the last Israeli outpost overlooking Gaza, talking to an Israeli man and Israeli woman who lived in the settlement outside of Gaza, as a rocket went off and was fired into that very settlement, a practice that every day continues to take place, to intimidate, to threaten, and to terrorize.

As long as elements of terror such as Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon continue to disrupt, we will never be able to reach a platform upon which we can have a roadmap to peace. But security could possibly take place. I want to commend the Palestinian Authority on its initial steps in the West Bank, one village at a time, to attempt to bring about peace and security on that side of Israel and in that area of the dilemma.

I met with the Foreign Minister, Riyadh Maliki, of the Palestinian Authority, who passionately convinced me that he and his leadership are inter-

ested in seeing to it that they deliver on that security, because they understand that without security there can never be any peace, without peace there can never be a Palestinian State.

This President, George Bush, whom I commend for bringing about the Annapolis conference, was very courageous 6 years ago when as President of the United States he declared he would support a homeland and security for the Palestinian people, right after the Palestinians and the people of the Middle East accepted and acknowledged Israel's right to exist and respected its state.

I believe the desire is in the Palestinian people to have their homeland. I believe the will is there to see to it that is accomplished. But as long as terror, through the elements of Hamas and Hezbollah, continue to threaten and intimidate the people of Israel, it will never happen.

So the first step, following that agreement at Annapolis, is for the Palestinian Authority to secure Gaza and to secure the West Bank. But you do not go to the Middle East, as I have four times in the last 5 years, and not realize in the end it is also all about Iran.

As long as there are state sponsors of terrorism, whether it be Hezbollah or Hamas or whether it be infiltration of terrorists or IEDs into Iraq, you can never truly have peace and security.

But this President deserves great credit for setting up the conference at Annapolis. Condoleezza Rice deserves great credit for five times traveling to the Middle East, from one Arab state to the other, encouraging those states to attend. It should not go unnoticed by anybody, us in America and Ahmadinejad in Iran, that when finally pressed, the 18 Arab states all came to Annapolis because, in the end, they all want peace. But in the absence of security and the presence of terror it cannot happen.

I commend our President for bringing about the conference in Annapolis. I commend the people of Israel for making the first step in Gaza and acknowledge their concern now that that first step has only been rewarded with acts of terror against their own people and encourage the Palestinian Authority to continue to work in the West Bank, and later in Gaza, to root out terrorism, bring about security, so the State of Palestine and the State of Israel can live in harmony. And for us in the free world, one of the biggest threats to our security is lessened because people are living together in peace and not in terror and not in fear.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge the great ally we have in Israel, the resilience of their people, to that young man and woman I met on the hill overlooking Gaza, who daily meet the threats of rockets coming from terrorists, and let them know that we in America are with them, and one day peace and security can become a reality if we begin to get the security in